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22. Writing Our Own History: Storming the Wimpy Bars (1983)

Sara Scott interviews Lilian Mohin

Sara: *When were you first involved in the Women's Liberation Movement?*

Lilian: Literally, physically, in 1970, when I came to live in England. I'd been reading feminist literature, avidly, in America, but had been too frightened to join up with any of the feminist groups that were available where I was living, mainly because I felt they were big and strong and wonderful and I was not. That was to do with a kind of media hype that I don't think exists here.

Once here, I felt I had a sort of foreign status and could sally forth immediately which I did. This was 1970 and I was married and had two children and I went off to my first consciousness-raising group meeting in Notting Hill.

Sara: *What sort of awareness did you have, at that time, of being part of a movement, of there being other things going on?*

Lilian: A lot really. There was already the Women's Liberation Workshop in London which was a kind of umbrella for lots of small CR groups. It seemed necessary for the groups not only to talk and develop theory from that, but also to come together regularly and do things, and then go back into our groups and see whether that had worked and what it meant... At that time there was a demonstration against the 'Miss World' competition at the Albert Hall. I didn't go to the 'Miss World' demonstration, I felt it was not appropriate for me to get arrested—who would look after the kids? But not long after that I was involved in the Wimpy Campaign in 1971, have you heard about that?

Sara: *No! Miss World, yes, but Wimpy Bars?!*

Lilian: Ah, well, it was one of the many things that were going on, I think in the rest of the country as well as London. The Wimpy chain had a rule about not serving what they called 'unaccompanied women' after 10 pm. If you wanted to eat after 10 you had to go in with a man, and they were putting up signs in Wimpy Bars that said this. Although why anybody wanted to enter a Wimpy Bar anyway was not clear. Still we were concerned that we weren't allowed to go, even though most of us didn't want to.

So there were demonstrations. In Golders Green they tried letting off stinkbombs, but no-one noticed! It was just awful, no-one did anything. Eventually, there was a planning group of all the groups that were involved in this Wimpy business. We got legal advice and learned that any place open to the public at night could exclude anyone on the grounds that they were likely to be criminals. The categories considered most likely to be detectable at a glance were thieves and prostitutes. And they decided only women could be prostitutes...

We were very angry, with that sense of exhilaration that came with a first heady taste of anger on our own behalves, not just anger like when someone is mean to you personally, but a righteous blaze for all women, for ourselves as part of all women, superseding the individualism we'd all been brought up on.

We sent letters to the managers and owner of Wimpy Bars—Metropolitan Hotels—who took little notice. Companies House provided their names and even home addresses which was handy. To encourage them to shape up we wrote to the tourist board asking for censure of the Wimpy Bar chain on behalf of women tourists and to Nicholson's Guides who, like the tourist board, publish guides to late night eating places. We got articles—all in our favour—in the Evening Standard and in local papers too. But what was much more important than any minor triumph like being allowed to eat without men after 10 pm in a Wimpy Bar, or being noticed and patted on the head by the establishment, i.e. the press, was what we learned about our strengths, our own intentions, our capacities for working together, for being inventive together. Sure, we made trouble wherever we could for 'them' but what we really did was make sense to and for each other.

We formed a co-ordinating group and at last mounted a massive demonstration outside the Marble Arch Wimpy Branch. Gay Liberation Front men and women and a women's theatre group came dressed in a huge variety of drag. Small children were brought along, too. We wanted to make a noticeable point about assumptions—what is a woman? When is 'she' accompanied? If she's brought a child? With a child of what sex can she be deemed to be 'accompanied'? What if she's wearing men's clothes? How about men in dresses? What does any of it MEAN?

Sara: *How did it go on the day?*

Lilian: I'd gone into Covent Garden and hired a costume from *The Sound of Music* for one of the women in my CR group, so she went in a very wonderful royal blue nun's habit. It was very exciting. We marched. We had picket signs of our own creation—not anyone else's slogans. Exhilarating. Fun even.

In the week before that demo several women in the planning group had become ill or had other reasons for not being able to manage the last minute organising and I was left doing most of it. To me this seemed temporary, an accident. But at the demo there were suddenly a lot of cops piling out of vans in a determined looking sort of way and a few fought through the crowd to get to me—small mousey-looking me—to say, archly, ‘Who’s in charge here?’ I gave our standard reply, ‘We do not have anyone in charge, thank you very much’. They didn’t bend to this but departed leaving the uneasiness which may have been what they intended.

The manager closed down the Wimpy Bar early and we felt so pleased with ourselves that some of us rushed off to another Wimpy branch in Paddington. That was very different. Evidently the Marble Arch lot had been alerted to our demonstration before it happened and were prepared. So were the cops. So it had been in reality fairly civilised. But at the one opposite Paddington Station the manager was completely unprepared and panicky. We must have looked like dangerous maniacs approaching his nice plate glass window—a mob headed by a heavily made-up nun. There was a revolving door into this place and my friend in the nun’s outfit, who also had a calliper on her leg which wasn’t visible under the habit (she had had polio as a child) led the way into it. Just as she got in the door compartment, the manager stopped the door, crushing it against her leg and locked it, with the patrons inside and us outside. She screamed. We screamed. The people inside the Wimpy Bar screamed. We demanded to get in and rescue our friend. The people inside were desperate to get outside. This sudden terribleness. The police came again but different ones than at Marble Arch.

Everything lost that cheerful fantasy air very fast. Although they made the manager extricate the nun at once, they were interested in protecting the Wimpy manager and in what evil we represented. At that time there was a lot of publicity around the Angry Brigade² and the police asked if we were anything to do with them. Some of us hadn’t heard of the Angry Brigade, others assumed the question was were we angry and we were, of course, and said so.

Sara: *So what happened in the end?*

Lilian: Eventually we were released. I returned the nun’s habit to the hire place, albeit with pancake make-up on the wimple. Wimpy Bar management invited us to a discussion which was in fact a polite capitulation.

Sara: *What do you think you learnt from the action? Did it seem like a victory?*

Lilian: Sure, a small one in a way. But, as I said, the importance of this and other early actions was in what we learned both about how the world operates and about what we might be able to do for ourselves. Working on what we really wanted—which for most of us didn't include Wimpy Bars in any way—followed. Even symbolic action had to be closer to our own lives than this.

That demonstrations are so heavily, so rigidly, structured in the minds of the police and also in our own minds was very revealing. If we hadn't hared off to Paddington perhaps it would have been less obvious that we had been playing by rules, somehow allowed to demonstrate, naughty little girls given a small space in which to misbehave. It reminded me of all I'd read about why guerilla warfare works. Somehow I think we had collaborated in a standard view of the situation, of ourselves. A demonstration is such a predictable number, so within male expectations... so bloody useless, really. Talking about what we'd done, what we'd thought, led us into quite other areas, away from such obvious lefty and traditional actions. Confrontations with authority were played by rules that we accepted somehow but certainly didn't create. For me, that particular demo illuminated the necessity to concentrate on us, not them.

Notes

1. Wimpy Bars were a chain of inexpensive restaurants whose signature menu item was a hamburger and chips. Invented in the 1950s in imitation of American fast-food restaurants, they were once ubiquitous on Britain's high streets, but their popularity diminished after McDonald's crossed the Atlantic.
2. The Angry Brigade was an anarcho-communist group which was responsible for a bombing campaign in Britain in the early 1970s.